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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SINGAPORE 000178

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [SN](#)

SUBJECT: SFA: AMB LAVIN CALLS ON DEFENSE MINISTER TEO

Classified By: Amb Frank Lavin; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary: Ambassador Lavin reviewed with Defense Minister Teo Chee Hean progress to date in negotiations on the U.S.-Singapore Strategic Framework Agreement, in a meeting December 30. The Ambassador expressed the frustration the U.S. government felt at the current stage of discussions, in part because of Singapore's unwillingness to come through on any of the requests we had made in three main areas: legal protections for U.S. service personnel, the ability of US personnel to bear arms, and the provision for personally owned automobiles. Minister Teo took the Ambassador's points on board, but did not concede any ground. The Minister also rejected the Ambassador's assessment that Singapore was not respecting the spirit of the 1990 MOU, as amended. End Summary.

A Strong Relationship

2. (C) Ambassador Lavin called on Minister Teo December 30, just as the extent of the damage wrought by the tsunami was becoming widely known and almost immediately after Singapore began to dispatch the first of its helicopters to affected areas of Indonesia and Thailand. The conversation opened with a discussion of what assistance our respective countries were preparing to send to victims. Upon hearing that the U.S. aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln would be steaming past Singapore on its way to Sumatra, Minister Teo offered 24-hour use of Paya Lebar airbase and Changi naval base for U.S. relief operations.

3. (C) Ambassador Lavin used this type of cooperation as an example of the excellent working relationship we now enjoy with Singapore, particularly on the military side. The Ambassador expressed pride at the progress we have made together in the last few years as our operations here ramped up during Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. Singapore staunchly supported us in both operations and is now providing military assets in OIF. The relationship is "very positive," said Ambassador Lavin, and has great potential to grow, which is why we agreed with Singapore's suggestion that we try to negotiate a Strategic Framework Agreement to push the relationship to a higher level.

Progress Stymied By GOS Approach

4. (C) Given these hopes, and the last year and half of negotiations, the U.S. government now was concerned at the apparent lack of progress in the talks, the Ambassador continued. It was dismaying that issues like automobiles should rise to the level of a conversation between the Ambassador and the Minister. We did not understand the apparent disconnect between the Singapore government's stated desire for an expanded "strategic" partnership and its unwillingness to provide for the most basic of requests regarding force protection, quality of life (personal vehicles) and legal protections for U.S. service personnel. How could we expand the relationship when we could not even resolve basic issues over the last several years? Further, the Ambassador noted, it was the USG's view that two of those issues (cars and arms) were actually provided for in the 1990 MOU as amended, but now the Singapore government not only was not fulfilling its commitments under the MOU, but was even trying to roll back those commitments in its recent texts.

5. (C) Minister Teo challenged the assertion that Singapore was not living up to the spirit or the letter of the 1990 MOU. Regarding certificates of entitlement (COEs) for automobiles, Colonel Gary Ang (who has been leading the Singapore Government's negotiations) stated that "currently there are no 'outstanding' requests for additional COEs. We have always responded to your requests." The Ambassador pressed him to define "outstanding" -- "For example, if we requested 100 COEs and you provided 10, would you say that that request was no longer outstanding?" Ang replied, "yes." Turning to Yeo, the Ambassador remarked that this was an example of the way Singapore seemed to be approaching these issues from a narrow, legalistic, and bureaucratic point of view. It was difficult to square that approach with the notion that our countries should be significantly expanding a "strategic" relationship. If we were unable to provide for even the number of U.S. personnel present now, how could we deal with expansions in the U.S. military presence that might be required by projects such as the proposed C-2 center,

asked Ambassador Lavin. This unreasonably restrictive approach on the part of Singapore called into question the viability of U.S. participation in projects like the C-2 center. Ultimately, the U.S. would have to place its assets where they were welcome and provided for, he added.

Teo: Singapore Wants U.S. Here

16. (C) Minister Teo noted that discussions on the SFA had begun a year and half ago, when both nations faced serious challenges, in the war against terror and the fighting in Iraq. "Singapore knew we would have to deal with these issues together over a long period of time. Our strategic objectives have not changed over the years -- we want you out here in Asia," said Teo. "We expressed that in the 1990 MOU." Singapore wanted the U.S. in Asia over the long run and had to create a sustainable political environment to allow that to happen. Singapore wanted the U.S. military to be comfortable in Singapore and for Singaporean citizens to be comfortable with the U.S. "That means," said Teo, "that the U.S. will not be able to create the same kind of situation as you enjoyed at Clark airbase or enjoy in Tuscon."

17. (C) Teo urged that we not let these limitations prevent us from moving the relationship forward. He affirmed that Singapore was still serious about concluding the SFA and that his staff would work hard to do it. Singapore was determined to live up to the commitments it has made and would make. Teo also alluded to an issue Singapore had hoped to resolve or improve during the negotiations, but on which the U.S. had failed to yield -- technology transfer. Teo expressed great appreciation for the hard work of the Embassy and Ambassador Lavin personally for ensuring that Singapore got the best technology available. That said, Singapore had hoped that the SFA's DCA would provide at least a nod to best-efforts on technology transfer to Singapore, a hope to which the U.S. seemed unable to accede, he remarked.

18. (C) The Ambassador expressed appreciation for Teo's assurance that Singapore would fully live up to earlier commitments, which we took to mean in part that the automobile COE issue would be resolved at last.

19. (C) Comment: The purpose of the call was to ensure that the Singapore government heard at the political level that wide-spread dissatisfaction exists within the USG on progress to date in the SFA talks, and that we viewed the main barrier to progress as the GOS's short-sighted and decidedly un-strategic, zero-sum approach to the negotiations. The current mil-mil relationship with Singapore indeed is excellent and important to us. Its staying precisely where it is now would be no tragedy. Nevertheless, the Singaporeans themselves have asked to try to expand the depth and breadth of the "strategic" relationship. It is a pity that they have allowed their instinctive need to better their interlocutor in the negotiations to actually block progress toward any of our objectives, even relatively simple ones such as COEs for automobiles. We understand that we will send to them shortly a line-in/line-out version of the MOU amendments; Embassy hopes that we can keep our sights focused on the three key issues as defined in the non-paper from OSD (COEs, right to bear arms, legal protections) and use progress on these items as a litmus test for Singapore's willingness to bring these negotiations to a successful conclusion. Embassy also recommends that we scrub our own proposed DCA text again to see if some sort of language recognizing Singapore's desire for improved technology transfer can be accommodated.

LAVIN